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National Intelligence Estimate Reaffirms Pakistan's Role in Defeating Taliban

LSE Ideas

By Faheem Haider

The latest National Intelligence Estimates (NIE) for Afghanistan and Pakistan report what most analysts of the region and the wars there already know: the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan won't work unless the Pakistani government and military rounds up its Taliban allies and breaks the back of the various groups that constitute the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The New York Times was leaked the documents and, yesterday, Elisabeth Bumiller wrote an intriguing piece announcing the findings of the reports:

"The reports, one on Afghanistan and one on Pakistan, say that although there have been gains for the United States and NATO in the war, the unwillingness of Pakistan to shut down militant sanctuaries in its lawless tribal region remains a serious obstacle. American military commanders say insurgents freely cross from Pakistan into Afghanistan to plant bombs and fight American troops and then return to Pakistan for rest and resupply."

She further wrote that the NIE offers the "the consensus view of the United States' 16 intelligence agencies, as opposed to the military, and were provided last week to some members of the Senate and House Intelligence Committees." She reported that military officers are far more open to an optimistic outcome, given the military's somewhat successful push into Kandahar, the local hotbed of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. The differing views on the likely short to medium outcome in the Af/Pak region might pertain to a widely held view within the intelligence services that there exists a strategic stalemate between the partisan and near boiling civil war there, unless Pakistan makes a move against its own strategic prerogatives. Those strategic prerogatives require that the Pakistan government and military aid and abet the Taliban in order to maintain, so-called, strategic depth in Afghanistan as a countermove to the perceived Indian intervention into Afghanistan's domestic politics—and by extension, intervention in the very heart of Pakistan. The military fighting in the field might well require that the world be such that victory in Afghanistan and Pakistan is possible and indeed, likely. Otherwise, soldiers might think, why fight?

President Obama will release his December, mid-policy review tomorrow (Thursday December 16th). Along with the spate of news that fares badly for his efforts in the Af/Pak region, the recent death of his Special Envoy, Richard Holbrooke has surely dealt him a blow. Further, that his 30,000-troop spring time surge only worked into the field this past September can't help the politics of the policy much. Whatever the merits of the surge, there's simply not been sufficient for the surge to ramp up and show results, so say both intelligence analysts and military officers. And results matter: President Obama's re-election hinges on a feasible exit strategy that politicians might credibly defend as victory in Afghanistan.

For all this and more, the political scene has been awash with the speculation that President Obama will segue to a narrower counter-terrorism policy directed against the insurgents in the tribal regions on the shared border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the meat of which Vice President Biden has long supported. This policy would demand fewer boots on the ground and would be consistent with both the 2011 draw down and the commitment to stay in Afghanistan and Pakistan until at least 2014.

The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) simply confirms a political fact that most analysts concerned with Afghanistan and Pakistan have known for at least a year. The War in Afghanistan is lost to the U.S and NATO, in every credible form, under every credible definition that applies to "loss", unless Pakistan digs in and thrashes out the Taliban.

The trouble is that Pakistan will likely not turn out the Taliban. Leaders of the government and the military in Pakistan think they need those groups of militants to secure Afghanistan for their own interests after the U.S and its NATO allies leave. Indeed the recent Wikileaks diplomatic cables show that India is worried about the Taliban return to power.

A series of cables have surfaced that bear on conversations between Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony and then-U.S. National Security Advisor James Jones.

One cable reads: "The Indian military is concerned by the situation in Afghanistan, Antony admitted, and stressed that the international community's operations there must succeed because the India cannot imagine for a moment a Taliban takeover of its "extended neighbor". Pakistan's government is worried that its Indian counterpart intends to push into Afghanistan to create a bulwark against Pakistan's moves to spur on an ongoing insurrection in Kashmir and to engage in acts of terrorism or Indian soil, in the name of that distant insurrection.

Pakistan's government may be right to worry. The leaked cables show that among India's top concerns is that NATO and the U.S. supply and resupply their troops in Afghanistan through Pakistani land-routes. Indian officials worry that given the transport route, Taliban forces, known to bribe and buy off border guards, stand to siphon off a great deal of explosive material for their home made improvised explosive devices (I.E.D's). Thus, India is worried that NATO and the U.S military indirectly funds the insurgency that they are fighting. Since the funding and supply chains seem near endless, so then is the insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Suppose then that it were possible to pay off the Pakistani military to do the U.S. and NATO's bidding and maintain strict and incorruptible border controls. Suppose the Pakistani military were offered unlimited caches of weapons and fighter jets and so on, along with financial aid to increase pay rates in the armed forces, for instance. Even then, it is unlikely that the U.S and its NATO allies would be able to buy out the Pakistani military and intelligence officials. (This is perhaps the greatest obstacle to curbing corruption in Pakistan's government and military institutions.)

For, the Pakistani military's ambivalence with the U.S and its NATO allies has little to do with money. The military is already awash with foreign aid funds, from major NATO donors. The problem lies in the perceived idea that the NATO is trying to steal away from Pakistan's its source of credible deterrent from a possible Indian military invasion. Again, the Wikileaks cables show that the U.S and NATO have long been interested in removing a store of highly enriched uranium from Pakistan for fear of it falling into the hands of Taliban insurgents, and worse, Al Qaeda, based in Pakistan.

The strategic game afoot in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the one that the Obama Administration's Af/Pak policy is meant to draw toward U.S interests, is intractably complicated. And, perhaps, irreparably geared against those U.S interests because, at the end, Pakistan is afraid that it will lose everything that it values— its arms, its nuclear weapons, its very identity— to India's intervention. In this, it may not matter that the fear is nearly as unfounded as the belief that Pakistani government and military leaders will be able to control the Taliban that they have long bred and reared.

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